

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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EPIPHANY

4th January 2015

Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6

Tuesday will be marked in many churches as the feast of the Epiphany. I don't know about you, but I first heard the word epiphany used in the context of "That's when the Christmas decorations have to be down." In fact if, when I was ten or so, you had asked me what the word meant, I would probably have thought for a while, puzzling it out, and answered "un-decorating". Which just shows that we should explain ourselves better!

Epiphany. The word means something along the lines of revelation, realisation, appearing. An epiphany is when we realise something in a new way and our lives are changed by it. You had an epiphany when you saw the person who was to be your husband or wife and realised that this was who you wanted to marry – it might have been at first sight, it does happen sometimes - but more often it happens after you have known someone for a while. Suddenly or gradually you have the revelation, or realisation that this is The One. Life is never the same again.

The story of the wise men deals with epiphanies of all sorts. First of all there were the various epiphanies which the wise men themselves had.

The first one was when, in the course of their study of the night sky, they saw the star that arose where it wasn't expected. In their philosophy, unexpected happenings in the heavens, whether stars or comets or conjunctions of planets – and the star of Bethlehem could have been any of these - these unusual happenings meant something. It was the task of the observer to work out what. There was something about this new star, this unusual happening which convinced the wise men that the thing it pointed to was a new king in Judah – maybe it was something in the constellation of the lion, Leo, since the lion was the symbol of Judah. Whatever it was, it was supremely important – they didn't go trekking to see every new king in the east, but this one was different – we know that they knew that because when they got to Herod's palace they said they had come to worship him. To worship? Usually royalty is honoured, but not worshipped. One of the reasons that Julius Caesar had been assassinated some forty years before was that he had begun to aspire to naming himself as divine, and so worthy of worship. This was to be a recurrent theme amongst the emperors of Rome. They demanded worship. But usually honour was what was seen as appropriate. Yet the wise men said they wanted to worship the new king. They knew this one was special – special enough to travel for, special enough to put themselves out for, special enough to bow down before in worship.

Then they had an epiphany in Herod's palace, where they were given the revelation, the realisation that we can be misled by the trappings of power or importance and look for God in the wrong place. And how many of us have found this to be true – that we look for Jesus or look

for God only where we expect to find him by our own standards, and so risk missing his presence in the parts of life that we deem small, ordinary or unimportant.

One of the things that bugs many ministers and people called on to lead services around Christmas time is the expectation of the world that they will find Christmas peace and joy – which are God's gifts to us - in the tinsel and gifts and jollity of the season. This is why when a tragedy occurs near to Christmas time – and it always does, somewhere, because tragedies of various scales happen all the time – people say “At such a time” as if it being at Christmas makes it worse. The tragedies of life, the deaths in the family, the bin lorries going out of control on Glasgow streets, the lost aeroplanes and burning ferries are only worse at Christmas time if you are expecting to find God in the outward markers of the festival. If you think that God will only be present where there is warmth and safety and bright lights and laughter and food and love. God is in such times and places, God loves to know his children safe and happy, but his presence is found by those who look for him in the reason for the festival, not just in its trappings. And when the tragedies of life strike, at whatever time of year, the knowledge of Immanuel, God with us, which is the core of the Christmas message, is always a comfort, always important.

The wise men had another epiphany when the star led them to Bethlehem, to the place where the child Jesus was living with his parents. They found them an ordinary family in an ordinary house (not the stable by now). And seeing him they knelt down, they knelt to a baby, and his mother. When they set out, they had little idea that their journey would lead them to this, to an ordinary little house and an ordinary little family and what to all appearances was an ordinary little child. But God had shown them that he is to be found far more often in the ordinary, or what seems ordinary, than the unusual. He is to be found in what seems ordinary and his presence makes the very usual things of life special.

But if the wise men received revelations and epiphanies along their journey, they also were part of an epiphany for those who were to meet and follow and ponder on Jesus. The story of the wise men is such a strange one. In some ways even more strange than the story of the shepherds and the angels. At least the shepherds were nearby. But these wise men, these magi – astronomers most likely - why did they come? And where from? We are simply told that they came from “the East,” the mysterious East. The story is too strange not to be true. And as the first disciples and as Matthew who wrote it down pondered on it they must have had questions which needed answers. Not just who were they and why did they come, but why did they offer him gifts which were to do with sacrifice and worship, with death and with kingly-ness? And the answer which the early Christians arrived at was this: the wise men were part of God showing to his people that his Son was for more than the nation, or for the time of his birth: he was for the whole world and for all time.

The wise men were a revelation, an epiphany to the way the church thinks about Jesus. Matthew uses their story in the same way the Luke uses the story of Simeon and Anna, who recognised the baby Jesus in the temple: he uses it to point to the fact that Jesus was for us all. Emmanuel was not just for his own time and place, Emmanuel is God is with us all and always.

Epiphany moments are not so uncommon, though they don't always come with precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. If you are a follower of Jesus, at some time you have undergone at least one epiphany – sudden or gradual. At some point you have seen that God in Christ is relevant to your life, and have seen it in such a way that your life will never be the same again.

An “epiphany moment” can refer to that point when there was a sudden realisation in our personal lives, or in the life of a group or even a whole church. It is when we begin to appreciate

that we will never look at our lives in the same way ever again. It can be so powerful that up until that moment it is as if we have been asleep all this time. If we had only known earlier we would have made the changes immediately. It is a coming-to-our-senses moment.

It is not just a realisation that changes our perspective but also changes our attitude and consequently our actions.

We might be amazed
We might be humbled
We might be changed
We might be surprised
We might understand
We might respond
We might believe
We might return

It could be triggered by someone, or by the timing of a set of circumstances.

Thinking about epiphanies in the Christmas season, they need not be triggered by the re-visiting of the Christmas story, though they may be. God can shine his light for us by other means as well. Your epiphany might come through the unexpected kindness of someone. Or through some programme or film you have had the chance to watch. It might come by a book you have had time to read over the Christmas holiday time, or by the prospect of the New Year.

But God shines his light for us, gives us revelations and realisations, leads us along his unexpected paths at all times, not just the special seasons of the year. God's epiphany for you could come out of a difficult period, the loss of a job, a breakdown in a relationship or a bereavement. What an epiphany does is to trigger a realisation that turns into a resolve to do something new or better.

An epiphany usually comes with both an element of surprise, and of rightness. I am sure that the wise men realised once they had met Herod how unlikely God would be to send his King to that family. I am sure that once they had got over their attraction to palaces and the trappings of power, they would see and wonder how they had not seen before, how right it was that God who cares for everyone, of whatever status, should make himself known through and to the lowest and least.

This is the fourth day of 2015. You may well have greeted the New Year with resolutions to do this or that, to do better. I hope you are still managing to keep them. But as you journey through this year, you know that there will be surprises. You know that you do not know what you will face, good or bad, or what you will learn. But keep looking to God, look to him even as the wise men looked to follow the star. Don't take your eyes off him, being attracted by the noise and glamour of the world, as the wise men did when they went to Jerusalem. "Lift up your eyes and look around, see" as the prophet encouraged us. Fix your eyes on Jesus, and as you travel through your days, God will shine his light for you and reveal to you things that as yet you cannot imagine. Amen.

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